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ABSTRACT

A study examined students' reactions to a writing placement test. Subjects, 98 fall 1992 freshmen at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, completed a questionnaire. Results indicated that: (1) only 24% liked the assigned writing topic; (2) 97% found the statement of the topic clear and understandable; (3) 77% were comfortable with the one hour allowed for the test; (4) 85% found the room comfortable; (5) 75% felt prepared for the test, but in different ways; and (6) 76% indicated that they could "hold their own" as writers. Follow-ups indicated that 98% of the students successfully completed whichever course they were placed in based on the placement test. Recommendations include: setting familiar topics that transcend socioeconomic barriers, previous preparation, and experience; and bridging the gap between high school English teachers and their college counterparts so that they can discuss their expectations of and assumptions about student writing. (RS)

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Placement Tests: The Writer's Reactions

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Abstract

Placement Tests, in various disciplines, have been and continue to be the focus of much research, but few studies, if any, have been focused on students' reactions to these tests. A questionnaire, specifically designed to focus on students' reactions to the writing placement test was given to 98 Fall 1992 Freshmen immediately after they took the test. Their responses are reported and discussed, and recommendations are made.

Placement Tests: The Writers' Reactions

Introduction

Although there is controversy surrounding placement tests in general, and there always will be, generally educators have few available alternatives; consequently, writing placement tests remain the most convenient, valid and reliable measure of a student's writing abilities. And the ever increasing diversity of entering Freshmen coupled with the "overall decline in students' preparation for college, particularly in the area of English and writing" (Astin, 1989, quoted by Bers & Smith, 1990, p. 17) make these tests especially crucial if college educators are to help students succeed regardless of their previous experiences. To a certain extent, the educators' purpose for using writing placement tests is clear; Cooper, cited by Bers & Smith (1990) sums it up when he says that holistic evaluation of writing "remains the most valid and direct means of rank-ordering students by writing ability" (p. 18). Studies have been done, focusing mainly on the setting, administering, scoring, and validating placement writing tests. Braddock, Lloyd-James & Schoer's (1963) Research in Written Composition is an invaluable source of such information. McKendy (1992) offers valuable suggestions concerning the development, scoring and validity of locally developed writing placement tests. Burne (1989) concentrates on helping faculty with the holistic grading process, while Bers & Smith (1990) concentrate on the reliability

and validity of writing placement tests. There are indeed many such studies dealing mainly with the tests and the graders, but few, if any, have been focused on the students' reactions to this very viable instrument for measuring their writing abilities. Our study focuses on the students' reactions to this task we set before them.

Method

A questionnaire (see Appendix) designed around the assignment variable was given to 98 Fall 1992 Freshmen immediately after they took the writing placement test; they were asked to write down their reactions to the topic they had written about, the wording of the question, the time they had been given, the physical and social environment they had been in, their previous preparation for the task, and how they perceive themselves as writers.

Results

For the first question: "What are your reactions to the topic?", only 24% liked the topic as it was. 22% liked the topic but had some significant reservations, making statements like "it was fair but could be improved"; "I wished the topic was more defined, more easily argued or more emotionally charged"; "my first reaction was bewilderment; what do I have to say about this topic"; "a person not updated with current problems and issues might not do well"; "it was not a topic with which everyone would have enough information to write on"; "at first, it was kind of a weird statement". The majority, 54%, had problems with the topic and used words like 'difficult', 'strange', 'hard', 'vague' and 'dull' to describe it. Others were 'baffled', 'confused', and 'shocked' when they read the question, and commented accordingly: "that was not what I

was expecting it to be"; "what in the world?"; "it was a very strange one. I truly did not expect it", and "the topic caught me off guard".

The responses to the second question: "Was the statement clear? Did you understand what you had to do?", shed more light into the responses to the first question. A majority, 97%, found the statement clear and understood it p rfectly, but they had complaints similar to those encountered in the responses to the first question: "I understood the statement and what was expected of me. I just wasn't really sure what to do with it"; "it was clear but what was I supposed to do with it?"; "a clear but unfamiliar statement", and "I do well with facts, research, but not imaginative papers". Only 3% indicated that they did not understand the topic. One of these said: "the statement was vague. Is America wasteful in time, money, environment, all of the above?".

Question 3 dealt with the time aspect of the topic variable: "Would you say that you were given enough time to comfortably work on the topic?". A majority, 77%, were comfortable with the time given. 12% even complained of having too much time as is evidenced in statements like: "I was given too much time"; "I am used to taking essay tests in 20-30 mins", and "I prepared for a 20 minutes essay; I spent 40 minutes sleeping". 11%,however, indicated a need for more time to think about the topic; they had never done timed essays before.

Question 4 addressed the examination environment: "Was the room comfortable?". The majority, 85%, found the room comfortable. Only 15% complained about their environment, but the complaints were easily addressable; for example there were complaints about the talking invigorator, "the man talked way too much breaking my train of thought," complained one.

Question 5: "In what ways did your writing background in high school prepare you or not

prepare you for this exam?", brought a variety of responses which clarified some of the responses given above. The majority, 75%, were prepared but in significantly different ways. There were those whom one spoke for when she said, " I was well prepared for the topic. I was given a topic similar to this one a week and was asked to write an essay on it." Another one said, "I was fully prepared. It was almost identical to a lot of the drills my English class did in preparation for the AP Exam." Some were sceptical of their preparation. "My high school English class was a creative writing class. Whether or not I myself was totally prepared is debatable," said one. "I was prepared in every way except the one topic given and time limit to finish the essay", said another, and "I was familiar with the 5 point theme". Most had been prepared to write grammatically and structurally impressive sentences. One said she was familiar with "paragraph formations and sentence structure". Another said, "I was prepared to structure my sentences and the grammar part of writing", and many other statements echoed this same experience: "I was prepared to write grammatically correct sentences, but not essays"; "it prepared me more for the grammar and mechanics, but not for development, continuity, and controlling ideas". 15% characterized their preparation as "of little significance." "We did not do a lot of writing", said one. "I really didn't write any essays on topics like this," said another; "I wrote in 9th grade but very little after that", said a third. And one echoed a statement made in a response to question number 2: "I was accustomed to essay tests in History". A few, 10%, had not been prepared at all and expressed themselves in no uncertain terms: "I was not prepared at all. I have never written an exam on such a short notice," said one.

For question 6: "If you were asked to describe yourself as a writer, what would you say?", only 5% described themselves as excellent writers; the majority, however, 76%, indicated that

they can hold their own; the remaining 19% described themselves as poor writers.

Follow-up

After recording these students' responses, we were interested in where they had placed in the English courses. Overall, they did very well. 4% placed in Composition 11, the majority; 91%, placed in Composition 1, and only 5% placed in Developmental English. We followed our study group to the end of their first semester, and again they did well. Of the 91% who had placed in Composition 1, 98% successfully completed their course, and so did the 4% who had placed in Composition 11, and the 5% in Developmental English.

Discussion

Over all, we worked with a group of academically expansive, viable students. According to The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Fact Summary Sheet, their mean Enhanced ACT composite was 22.2 as compared to Tennessee's 20.2 and 20.6 nation wide. Because it was a strong group, we had good reason to take these students' responses seriously, and they made us take a second look at the assignment variable of the writing placement test. As far back as 1963, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer, in a study published by the NCTE, advised that when it comes to topic choices for such tests, it is very important to "consider carefully the abstractness of the topic and its familiarity to the entire group of examinees"(p.8). They also went on to say that "in planning composition examinations for students from a wide range of backgrounds, it seems expecially necessary to consider the students' variations in intellectual maturity, knowledge, and socioeconomic backgrounds"(p.8), and that there should be "a possible

motivational factor in the topic assigned" (p.8) if we want the students to show us their best. Might we be overestimating our high school students' critical abilities by setting intellectually stimulating topics like "Wastefulness is a necessary part of the American way of life"? One response to the second question: "the statement was vague. Is America wasteful in time, money, environment, all of the above?" exhibited a clear lack of critical ability. Also, inspite of their high performance on the Enhanced ACT, successful placement and perfomance in their respective English courses, 76% of the students we surveyed were unable to comfortably identify with that topic as is indicated by their responses to question 1; it left a number of them 'wordless'. The responses to the time aspect also attracted our attention. Best writers generally follow a plan; an hour is barely enough time for a writer to plan, write, revise and proofread the work; how did some of our students, 12%, afford to sleep through that hour? Were they really writing essays as we had expected them to do? From the responses to question 5, we also noticed the diversity concerning high school preparation, most noticeably the fact that few had really done any such writing as was expected of them on this day; a number of these students had analyzed works of Literarure and answered essay questions in History; this was a new experience for them. Most had been prepared to write grammatically and structurally impressive sentences. This kind of preparation draws attention to what Appleman & Green (1993) have characterized as "the inconsistencies between our instructional practice and our methods of evaluating the papers [resulting] from that practice" (p. 191).

Recommendations

As mentioned in the introduction, writing placement tests are the best tools around for our placement purposes; we are not advocating doing away with them any time soon. What we are offering are suggestions intended to make taking such tests more comfortable and more acceptable to our in-coming Freshmen. Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer's suggestions mentioned under **Discussion** should be considered when setting topics. We might want to try topics directly related to our Freshmen's experiences like choosing a college and their fears and expectations as they enter college. We need to set familiar topics that would transcend socioeconomic barriers, previous preparation and experience, and at the same time stimulate a desire to write. We want these students to show us their best; let us try to prompt them to do just that by making the writer's own experiences a primary consideration when setting topics. Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) recommended that colleges be allowed to set their own placement tests based on what they want to emphasize when teaching Composition. McKendy (1992) reminds us of the above recommendation: "It is now the received wisdom of the profession that testing is best done by means of holistically scored writing samples, locally developed for local purposes" (p.149); this is a viable option. One hour remains sufficient time for this test; the students just need to be aware of the writing process which, for all practical purposes, cannot be completed in 20 minutes!! This brings us to that diversity concerning high school preparation; familiar topics as suggested above would be a good start, but there also has got to be a way of bridging the gap between high school English teachers and their college counterparts. According to Appleman & Green (1993):

Perhaps college instructors and high school teachers should begin to discuss their expectations

> and assumptions of student writing with each other. High school and college teachers, for example, might find it useful to attend professional meetings or conferences together and focus on the commonality of the challenges they face (198).

At The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, we do just that. Members of the English Department in conjuction with area high school English teachers hold half-day workshops once a year to update and share teaching techniques and also discuss instructional concerns affecting both groups. Every year, we concentrate on an area and invite a renown figure in that area as a keynote speaker who also participates in the discussions; overall, this workshop is always an enriching experience for all the participants, and the high school students whose teachers attend our workshops gain tremendously from that encounter between their teachers and the university faculty. In addition to talking with each other, we should, as Appleman & Green (1993) suggest, reconsider our expectations and reconcile them with the content we deliver to our students. In 1987, I wrote an article "Grammar: An Endangered Species in College Composition" advocating incorporating grammar instruction into our composition classes. It was never published because it was of "no interest to our readers". That issue is still of importance to me today. How many of us (writing instructors) can assign a perfect grade to a grammatically deficient paper? Appleman & Green (1993) sum this up precisely:

> we may need to admit to ourselves and to our students that despite our emphasis on the writing process, syntactic and linguistic maturity do matter .... If this is truly the case, and our experiences as writing teachers suggests that it might be, then it is only fair to incorporate our expectations of **grammatical and syntactic conventions into our instructional practice** (emphasis added) (p.198).

Conclusion

If "we assume that between high school writing and college writing exists a boundary that is real, if undefinable, and it is across that boundary that our students must travel" (Appleman & Green, 1993, p. 191), we need to ease our Freshmen's fears as they cross that elusive boundary; taking a closer look at our English Writing Placement Test will be a good start.

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Appendix

(After exam)

Exam question:

Date: Room:

Name:

S.S.N.:

1. What are your reactions to the topic?

2. Was the statement clear? Did you understand what you had to do?

3. Would you say that you were given enough time to comfortably work on the topic?

4. Was the room comfortable? (roomy enough? temperature okay?)

5. In what ways did your writing background in high school prepare you or not prepare you for this exam?

6. If you were asked to describe yourself as a writer, what would you say?